

Testimony for Health and Human Services Appropriations  
Subcommittee, Children's Mental Health Hearing  
January 15, 2009

Good morning, Ms. Chair and members of the Committee.  
My name is Susan Gunn. I live here, in Helena, Montana.

I come today as a special education teacher, a service provider, and most importantly, as an adoptive parent of a child receiving mental health services.

My son grew up in a family surrounded by his birth parents' drug and alcohol abuse, and the emotional, physical, and sexual abuse of himself and his 2 sisters. When he was 4 years old, he watched his parents attack each other with knives. In an attempt to save himself and his sisters (one of whom was 5 years old and the other 18 mos.) he shepherded them to a back bedroom and they hid there until the police found them. The children were removed from the home and sent to different placements. My son spent the next 9 months bouncing between 9 different placements. This was due to the lack of well trained, well paid foster homes available to deal with his increasingly out of control behavior. Finally, the day before Thanksgiving 2005, he arrived at my house.

Despite all the trauma my son has suffered, he is the most wonderful 8 year old boy anyone could ask for. He is bright, articulate, kind, funny, charming, and adventurous. Because his issues present at home, not in public, my son has been successful in the community. Last year, in second grade, he was named "Team Player of the Year" because of his exemplary grades and behavior. He has friends and is liked by everyone who meets him.

As I said, my son displays problem behavior at home. As a result of that, we participated in the PATH program at Intermountain Children's Home for 2 years prior to our adoption in April 2008. This program helped us by supporting us both emotionally, provided me with training to help my son, and gave my son a place to work on his issues in the summers and with his case manager. Because of that program, my son and I were able to bond and learn to love each other.

We left the program at the time of adoption, which is the norm. However, nine months later, we are again in need of help from Intermountain. My son has spiraled out of control and life is very difficult for both of us. When he comes home, my son's demons beset him. He has broken chairs, his bed, numerous toys, and ripped a piece off his tv set, and scarred up his bedroom walls and furniture. There have been many days when my son has hit me, thrown things at me, kicked and bitten me. My house has often seemed like a war zone as he works through the rage he feels at his birth parents and the life he was born into.

Even though I specialize in working with children with severe behavior disorders and have worked with, fostered, and done respite care for those children for the last 20 years, my son's issues are still difficult for me to manage. It's my belief that the people at the PATH program can help us work through both our issues to come to a more positive place. They will help my son learn to control and dissipate his anger in safe ways, and help me, help him.

My son has the potential to be not just a functional adult, but a happy, contributing, gentle man when he grows up if he receives the help he needs now. This is a critical period in his life. Either the services he needs, the PATH program, his

private therapist, and respite care are available at the levels he needs, or he will continue to flounder in a sea of rage and pain. I watch my child trying hard, every day, to do what is right and often losing the battle because I am not enough for him by myself. We, he and I, are in desperate need of mental health services. I find myself crying myself to sleep at night thinking about what the future could hold for my son, if he doesn't get the help now. I am terrified that my son my might end up in prison for abusing someone, just like his birthfather, or on the streets using drugs, like his birthmother if he doesn't get appropriate help.

I know that one of the deciding factors for whether my son receives those services or not is if there are enough people working for the agency we are using. Often, the lack of employees is directly tied to reimbursement rates for staff. Frankly, staff just isn't paid enough to put up with some of the behavior they encounter when working with emotionally disturbed children. It is vital that these programs are funded at a higher rate so that they can continue, and hopefully even expand their services to all who need them.

Thank you for your attention to these issues and to all the hard work you've put into this. I am deeply grateful for the services my son has received so far. I also want to thank you for letting me speak to you today.

Susan Gunn  
PO Box 4787  
Helena, MT. 59604  
406-461-9887